A Right Whale in the Wrong Place

Department of Education and Culture (to July 99)
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The skeleton of a huge Atlantic right whale will arrive at the Uniacke Estate Museum Park on Thursday, April 9, at 11 a.m.

The eight-year-old female right whale (Eubalaena glacialis) was killed last summer when hit by a ship in the Bay of Fundy. Her skeletal remains, now part of the Museum of Natural History's collection, are being brought inland to the Mount Uniacke park to be cleaned the natural way.

"This is an unique opportunity for the public to view what would happen unobserved in nature," said museum zoologist Andrew Hebda. "Usually, these things occur without our knowing or in remote places where we can't see what is going on."

The whale's two tonnes of bones will be laid out on a bed of straw in a simple but effective bone-cleaning centre. Located west of Uniacke House near the Trailhead, the cleaning centre is an enclosure measuring 4.5 metres by 12 metres and surrounded by a high fence to keep out animals such as coyotes and deer.

Through the fence, visitors will see larger bones like ribs and vertebrae. Beetles and other insects will be hard at work cleaning the last of the tissue, and the sun will be drying out the oils in the bone. It will take about two and a half years for the remaining tissue to be removed.

The remains are already quite clean, and the straw will absorb most of the odours. Visitors may notice a fragrant marine smell.

A project such as this requires a large amount of outdoor space. For this reason, Uniacke Estate Museum Park, a sibling of the Nova Scotia Museum's family of 25 museums, makes an excellent partner in this project. The park is open to the public year-round.

"This new skeleton will provide valuable interpretive opportunities," said Debra Burleson, director of the museum. "Visitors can watch how a museum prepares a large skeleton and consider what forces endanger and threaten the survival of this species. Public education is an important part of the whale's comeback plan."

The museum's collection contains two other whale skeletons, those of a minke whale and a pilot whale. Both are on display at the Museum of Natural History in Halifax.

The North Atlantic right whale is the world's most endangered whale, with fewer than 300 alive. When the skeleton is prepared, visitors will see the massive damage to the jaw caused by the collision with the ship. The story of this whale's death serves as a reminder of the dangers all whales face today.

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NOTE TO NEWS EDITORS: Museum zoologist Andrew Hebda will be on hand at Uniacke Estate Museum Park from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Thursday, April 9, to talk about the whale and the project. Photographers and camera operators will be permitted inside the fenced bone-cleaning centre during this period.

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